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# Paris Calling: Typical and Untypical Experiences of Latin American and African Diasporas

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## *Abstract*

A metropolis such as Paris may provide a common ground for the experiences of migrants coming from Africa and Latin American. The traditional capital of Latin American literatures is also considered to be the greatest agglomeration of African immigrants mostly coming from former French colonies. But a common ground does not necessarily mean that they have a great deal in common. Two novels, *Café Nostalgia* by the Cuban author Zoé Valdés and *Black Bazar* by the Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou, not only define the topographic base of their exile. They also discuss the special reasons for their residence in a city likely to offer rather different approaches to their autodiegetic narrators. While the young lady from Cuba longs for Havana's Malecón seeking to treat the persistent remainders and reminders of her traumas, the African resident by no means shares this nostalgia. The distance to the Caribbean island can be measured, whereas Africa is so far away that a return seems impossible. For the young Cuban narrator there is a way back to the roots of her childhood. Her Congolese counterpart, however, has no hope any longer to restore the links to a home which is likely to be deserted. Although Paris remains a topos for a deterritorialized postcolonial subject, the sets of references in the two novels obviously do not correspond to one another.

*Keywords:* Paris; Emigration; Cuban literature; Latin American literature; African literature; postcolonialism;

## **I. The Topography of Paris**

In his encyclopaedic Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin describes Paris as the capital of the 19th century, as a centre of modern times and cultural and industrial renewal exemplified in the World Fairs. Beyond this historical context, however, the metropolis offers more than just a prestigious plateau of buildings and boulevards slicing through winding, medieval alleys. In the underground, below the squares, a "great technological system of tunnels and thoroughfares [is linked] with the ancient vaults, limestone quarries, the grottoes and catacombs

[...].”<sup>1</sup> Apart from representing a metaphor of intersections connecting different epochs in a centre of the Western World, Paris is also associated with the fusion of different cultures as a metropolis in a double sense. On the one hand it is a place of real historical events and figures that provides on the other hand a screen for inexhaustible projections, discourses and imaginations as we can already observe in classical French novels (Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert). As the capital of a vast colonial empire, Paris attracted generations of colonial and post-colonial subjects, especially from Africa. This black Paris has been an object of literary research since the 1930th. To a lesser degree, studies have simultaneously identified the metropolis as a hub of Latin American authors such as Carlos Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, Zoé Valdés or Severo Sarduy.<sup>2</sup> Paris developed into a transcontinental meeting place of world literature, in which the success and boom of Latin American novels had a deep impact on authors of Francophone Africa: Amadou Kourouma and Sony Labou Tansi acculturated the genre in ways differing from the epic and “oral literature whose forms and functions still operate over a wide range of social and cultural activities in the traditional context and to a considerable extent in the modern world as well.”<sup>3</sup>

Considering its colonial background, one might argue that Paris could not be an appropriate place for the self-discovery of Latin-American and African immigrants. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the metropolis was still perceived as a centre of European self-arrogation and arrogance, even by those who had never been subjected to direct colonial rule by the French. Amado Nervo (1870-1919), a renowned Mexican journalist, put this intellectual subservience into drastic words, calling his native country a sad planet reflecting the borrowed light of an artistic and intellectual France; the brain of Europe and the world. Why, he asked, are Latin-American élites only enlightened by the sparkling shine of the prodigious metropolis of Paris, why are they reduced to the status of a sad echo of modern Babylon?<sup>4</sup> Despite this image, stimulated by a discourse “related to a subconscious faith that France is the bearer of the universal idea”,<sup>5</sup> there was also an idea of Paris as a rich centre of colonial emancipation. Léopold S. Senghor already referred to this idea in the 1930s. Living in the Quartier Latin, African intellectuals were exposed to the ideas of the Negro Renaissance which had great significance in

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Johnson: ‘Passage Work’. In: Beatrice Hansse (ed.): *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. London: Continuum, 2006, p. 66-86, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marcy E. Schwartz: *Writing Paris: Urban Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction*. New York: State University Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Abiola Irele: *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Amado Nervo: *Nuestra insignificancia*. In: *Cuentos y crónicas*. México: Umas, 1971, p. 94-99, p. 94-95.

<sup>5</sup> David C. Gordon: *The French Language and National Identity (1930-1975)*. The Hague: Mouton, 1978, p. 6f.

the making and maturation of a Black Personality in the United States. Becoming acquainted with the movement's poets, the self-esteem of young Africans grew considerably and this immediately affected the political self-confidence of the whole Negro-African civilisation.<sup>6</sup>

Just as large cities in the colonial world have always been ambiguous centres of both submission and emancipation, as shown in novels like *Ville cruelle* (1954) by Eza Boto (Mongo Beti), Paris, the metropolis, can be nothing more than a confusing space of racism, self-assertion and social exclusion. If at all possible, this space constitutes a new home based on an experience of life rather than a fixed topography. In discussing two novels, one by a Cuban author, Zoé Valdés' *Café Cuba*, and the other by a Congolese writer, Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*, we will examine whether Paris can function as a common ground where migrants can exchange uncommon memories from elsewhere, along with the attendant demons and angels they bring to their new domain. The titles of both books evoke open places, the bazaar and the café, where people meet, consciously or casually, in order to communicate thoughts and feelings they may or may not share.

## II. Two Authors of Different Spaces

### a. Zoé Valdés

Born in 1959, the year of the Cuban revolution, Zoé Valdés began as a child of the establishment, working in the Cuban delegation at UNESCO in the 1980's and as an editor of the magazine *Cine Cubano* between 1990 and 1995. This career definitively ended, however, with her novel *La nada cotidiana*, published in 1995. Containing a number of explicit sex scenes denounced by official Cuban propaganda as pornography, it depicts the life of the young woman, *Patria*, who wants to build a paradise on a Caribbean island. Instead, the island turns into an unliveable place from which one cannot leave and on which one cannot stay. It thus foreshadows the motifs later found in *Café Nostalgia*. Cuba's cultural institutions reacted to the novel with boycotts and smear campaigns, calling Zoé Valdés an ungrateful pseudo-writer living off counterrevolutionary flyers.<sup>7</sup> She consequently turned her back on her native country and presently lives in Paris with her third husband and daughter.

### b. Alain Mabanckou

<sup>6</sup> Michel Hauser: *Pour une poétique de la négritude*. Paris: Silex, 1988, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jean-Guy Allard: Denuncian actividad anticubana de alcaldía de París y llaman a protestar. In: *Granma*, 22.5.2010. Enrique Ubieta Gómez: Yoani Sánchez: la hija de prisa. In: *Granma*, 28.11.2009.

A native of Congo-Brazzaville born in 1966, Alain Mabanckou immigrated to France, where he studied law and worked in the civil profession for about ten years. Since his first novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, published in 1998, he has won several literary prizes and is considered to be one of the most talented French writers. He is also the first francophone sub-Saharan African author to be published by Gallimard in its prestigious collection *La Blanche*. Since his literary works have been published in many languages, including English, Mabanckou's reputation has transcended a pure career as literary creator. He has taught French-speaking literature both in France and abroad at US-American universities, attesting to the growing importance these works hold for academic investigation. The subject of novels like *Les Petits-fils nègres de Vercingétorix*, from 2002, or *Black Bazar* (2009) also gives evidence of the rising African diaspora whose intellectuals have gained in self-confidence over the last decades.

### III. Common grounds: Trauma – Loss – Remembrance

Though both authors live in Paris, they focus on separate immigrant groups of different sizes and significance: Valdés focuses on a small group of Cubans made up almost entirely of intellectuals, whereas Mabanckou takes a vast and sizeable Black African community as his subject. While Zoé Valdés' residence in Paris is more motivated by political issues, Alain Mabanckou is part of a diaspora that goes back to the French empire and the social grievances caused in the post-colonies after their independence. The French metropolis, however, forms a common point of reference, as shown by Zoé Valdés in the autobiographical account *The Tribulations of a Cuban Girl in Paris*, published in the volume *Paris was ours* (2011). In another collection, *Huit nouvelles* (2008), both authors contribute short stories (the Caribbean with *La main ouverte*, the African with *Le Huitième Conférencier*) in which the reader finds common ground in the portraits of women, men and children, all of which highlight the desperate need for a new model of development, as indicated on the cover of this book.

In the two novels under examination, however, the heroes have more in common than just this commitment. Both protagonists suffer from a trauma that is likely to provoke a chain of disruptions or dissociations affecting the unity of their lives. As a “feeling of being very upset, afraid, or shocked after a bad experience”,<sup>8</sup> a trauma is a severe psychological injury. It is impossible to forget and indestructible; a steady reminder of an unprocessed past, an “intense mental, emotional, or physical disturbance resulting from stress” such that “a broken home

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Webster's New Dictionary and Thesaurus*. Michael Agnes (ed.). New York: Macmillan, 1996.

may produce persistent trauma in children.”<sup>9</sup> In both novels, the protagonists must deal with the severe loss of a loved or desired person by death or abandonment. Marcela must work through a severe mental shock from which she has suffered since her youth, when she was left behind by parents who emigrated without her. Abandoned by his female companion, *Couleur d’origine*, the Fessologue finds himself desperate and completely alone in his apartment. He drowns his sorrows by acquiring a typewriter and beginning to write *Black Bazar*. The primary instrument for both protagonists is memory, which forms the subject of a wide field of research by such renowned cultural scientists as Maurice Halbwachs and Jan and Aleida Assmann.<sup>10</sup> In their research, they agree upon the collective basis of remembrance, which is shared by a community, a family, a school-class, an urban environment or a nation. In *Café Nostalgia* and *Black Bazar*, the characters integrate into their respective diasporas, which are also imagined communities, yet the personal traumata of each are deeply connected to this collective ground of memory.

Obviously, fiction is a privileged means of dealing with memory since it is based on the written code of language. In the Cuban novel, this mnemonic function is conducive to the healing of a wounded soul. In *Black Bazar*, however, we see that this denouement is not the only one possible. Although the main character is finally revealed as an author recreating the sombre reality of a Congolese immigrant in Paris, it becomes apparent that the memory encrypted in written or oral codes can easily record preliminary fixings. Recalling Ludwig Wittgenstein’s sceptical comments regarding the nature of language, we are aware that language can inscribe the fading of time in its own terms. But it is impossible to fix this act of the passing of time, encompassing the consistency and continuity of human life. In his notebooks, Wittgenstein asserts that no linguistic code can put that which belongs to the essence of the world into words. As the essence of language only corresponds to an image of this essence, it therefore cannot express that all is flowing.<sup>11</sup> Though a sentence may raise an issue and make it accessible to the minds of debating people, it describes a moment that has already passed. As such, it risks the perpetuation of a sudden state, an empty-headed remark, a mood. The character of language thus provides a possibility to circumvent the mind’s forgetfulness, but it also forms the basis of all types of prejudices, as shown in the discursive roulette of *Black Bazar*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, <sup>11</sup>2008.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Maurice Halbwachs: *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1994. Cf. Jan Assmann: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Beck, <sup>2</sup>1997.

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Wiener Ausgabe. Studien Texte*. Vol. 1-5. Michael Nedo (ed.). Frankfurt a. M.: Zweitausendeins, 2000, p. 132.

#### IV. The Central Question: The Different Aspects of Memory

In the Cuban novel, the act of writing is seen as a way to reconquer a lost or distorted biography by re-establishing a new view of a suppressed past. The autodiegetic narrator sees memory as a chance to rid herself of her own traumata, as a way to access trauma and rationalise it. In *Café Nostalgia* we can easily detect an inter-text largely determined by Marcel Proust and his experience with time, where present and past are so intertwined that chronology is no longer able to dictate its logic. Taken up by French novelists such as Flaubert and Proust, Kant's notion of time and space as mere products of the mind may be a good starting point for narratives of a diaspora entangled in a web of the past and the present, between here and there. In the case of the Cuban diaspora dispersed between Miami, New York, Paris and Madrid, migration has a dominant political aspect. There may be lots of *Cafés Nostalgias* in Miami or elsewhere, but the one particular to Marcela's life is a virtual network in which Cuban immigrants all over the world are connected via e-mails, postcards, faxes or letters. Because reminders of an exile's native country have almost no reference to space and concrete life on foreign shores, and thus cannot be reconstructed, communication plays an outstanding role.<sup>12</sup>

Even though this community shares a common political background, its members are separated by different traumata, anxieties and pains, fuelling a collective memory. Through the paradigm of the Jewish people we are aware of the importance of traditions in written form. Exchanging and fixing biographical memories ensures the existence of a collective identity. In Marcela's case, the reconstruction of the Cuban legacy originates in the painful experiences her body, her sexuality, has suffered. Though criticised for its abundant pornographic passages, these references are grounded in the conflicts to which the young woman is exposed. The experience of her vital instincts therefore corresponds to the affirmation of a self, lost in a foreign metropolis. Although belonging to a minority group members of a diaspora often perceive themselves in a collective way. However, exile almost plays an individual role, drawing our attention to the personal loneliness and abandonment of exiled people. Marcela must retire into an inner exile, "el insilio",<sup>13</sup> which affects her far more than the expatriation she shares with so many other compatriots. Like a diary, the novel constitutes a sort of alter

<sup>12</sup> Stephan Milich: *Fremd meinem Namen und fremd meiner Zeit: Identität und Exil in der Dichtung vom Mahmud Darwisch*. Berlin: Schiler, 2005, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dieter Ingenschay: Exilio, insilio y diáspora. La literatura cubana en la época de las literaturas sin residencia fija [en línea]. In: *Ángulo Recto*. Revista de estudios sobre la ciudad como espacio plural 2/1 2010, accessed on 1 August 2012 on <http://www.ucm.es/info/angulo/volumen/Volumen02-1/articulos02.htm>.

ego to which she confides her secrets in order to rid herself of the sexual trauma she has had to deal with. Just as the Cubans forced into exile are mentally confined to their island, the young woman is kept imprisoned in her own body, which is completely reduced to its most existential needs and no longer able to feel love or joy. Both the diaspora and Marcela are captives of a past that does not release them, and both are condemned to free themselves from their demons.

Marcela's biography refers to a special trauma. Prior to losing her home and her parents, she falls in love with a married man, Jorge, whom she meets while he is playing with his young son in the park. She sends him enthusiastic love letters that his very jealous wife happens to discover. The tragedy takes its course when the wife burns her husband alive while he is asleep during siesta. Confronted with Jorge's carbonised corpse, Marcela is overwhelmed by her conscience and never succeeds in bearing the guilt that is not hers. At the age of nineteen, she meets a seventy- year-old Frenchman and they celebrate a fictitious marriage. Some years later she finally leaves Cuba, following him to France where she unsurprisingly does not find the happiness she longs for. After a difficult time with occasional jobs Marcela discovers her talent for photography and builds a great career in New York. She nevertheless retires from a prominent life of success, moving to Paris to live in a house with other Cuban compatriots. There she becomes attached to Samuel, who happens to be the son of her unfortunate love, Jorge. Unable to admit her feelings, she discovers her body as the source of joy and sorrow. The young man, likewise a victim of his mother's crime, gradually puts her trauma into new perspective, relieving Marcela of the burden she has had to bear. Marcela finally learns that her schoolmate had an affair with Samuel's father and shifted the blame onto her. Until the end of the novel, Marcela suffers under the burden of a never-ending trauma that urgently needs to be resolved with the help of those related to its origins. Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra* also suggests becoming familiar with origins means searching for new sources in the future.<sup>14</sup> Creating an initially platonic and then erotic relationship with Samuel, Marcela returns to her roots. Within the Proustian inter-text marked by Marcela's own literary preferences, she swings back and forth, between past and present.

The narration interweaves numerous texts from different sources, such as Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge in his notebooks* (1910) and the famous Cluny tapestries *The Lady and the Unicorn*, which individually recall the five senses, *La vue* - Sight, *L'ouïe* – Hearing, *L'odorat* –

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<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: Also sprach Zarathustra. In: *Sämtliche Werke*. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden. Giorgio Golli/Mazzino Montinari (ed.). Berlin/New York/München: de Gruyter, Vol. 4, p. 265.



Smell, *Le goût* – Taste and *Le toucher* – Touch.<sup>15</sup> The last chapter of the book is reserved for the open question of Marcela's sixth sense: *A mon seul désir* – To my only desire, "the only sense that enables her to return to her origins in a way that does not leave her alone, threatened, or adrift."<sup>16</sup> Characterising Marcela's efforts to overcome the inconveniences linked to her trauma, the novel is constructed according to these senses. In a very literal way this also includes feeling comfortable in the skin of her body. In the end, she finds her love to Samuel in sharing a Cuban meal; a feast transcending mere food to be understood in the German sense of word.<sup>17</sup> Since the physical existence of both Marcela and Samuel is fundamental for the other's survival, they begin consuming each other, cutting slices into their bodies, frying and tasting organs like cannibals. By liberating and exchanging their blood, their tongues, and their entrails, their bodies disintegrate on a metaphorical level, closing the painful period of their exile. Reclaiming her senses, her joy and her love of life, Marcela is able to blow up the prison, the 'insilio' of her body.

As the literary critic asserts, "not only contemporaries in the *Orígenes* group, but also later generations of Cuban writers including Zoé Valdés's"<sup>18</sup> follow Lezama Lima's idea of "a reading of the tradition in the text by means of the mediating function of memory."<sup>19</sup> This technique finds its particular legitimacy in the diasporic aesthetics which has to deal with the fact that Cubans are dispersed all over the world, detached from their natural community on the island. Deeply rooted in the literary tradition marked by Lezama, the author complies with the power of reminiscent memory by connecting the Cuban part of the narration with international inter-texts.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, we must deal with Lezama's approach to hallucinations of childhood: While Proust is perceptible and tangible in every chapter of *Café Nostalgia*, there are no explicit references to Rilke's *Notebooks*, although this source also relates to the omnipresent motif of reminiscence. The luminous hand as a metaphor of an enhanced transcendence of fiction also demonstrates to Marcela the potential literary traditions, figures and discourses used to have. Both Rilke as well as Valdés are composing texts in a modernity

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jean-Patrice Boudet: La Dame à la licorne et ses sources médiévales d'inspiration. In: *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1999, p. 61-78.

<sup>16</sup> Francisco Antonio Scarano; Margarita Zamora: *Cuba: contrapuntos de cultura, historia y sociedad*. San Juan: Editorial Callejón, 2008, p. 340.

<sup>17</sup> In German, food means 'Lebensmittel', i.e. 'life resources'.

<sup>18</sup> Isabel Alvarez Borland: A Reminiscent Memory: Lezama, Zoé Valdés, and Rilke's Island. In: *MLN* (Hispanic Issue) 119/2 (2004), p. 344-362, p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> Enrico Mario Santí: Lezama, Vítier y la crítica de la razón reminisciente. In: *Revista Iberoamericana* 41 (1975), p. 535-46, p. 537.

<sup>20</sup> José Lezama Lima: 'Julián del Casal'. In: *Confluencias: Selección de ensayos*. Ed. by Abel E. Prieto. La Habana: Ed. Letras Cubanas, 1988, p. 181-205, p. 183.

where clear and limited communities gradually give way to dispersed minorities co-existing with others.

Lezama's appeal to dispersed contemporary Cuban authors to unite behind a national canon is therefore aimed at bringing together the different Diasporas dispersed all over the world. In the context of this novel, *Café Nostalgia* is the virtual point where Marcela's initiation as a self-confident and self-reliant woman takes place. Here, the messages from Cuban communities in Europe and the USA, "used to analyse an adverse Cuban socio-political reality of the early 1990s," go hand in hand with the stories their senders tell Marcela, who is herself in the process of discovering her senses as illustrated on the Cluny tapestries.<sup>21</sup> As such, the novel is a work in progress; the result of multi-layered narrations to be assembled and arranged by Marcela as the autodiegetic narrator. The individual members of the community live like tiny islands in the labyrinth of the metropolis, in cities or even in villages, disconnected from daily life in Cuba with its rituals, celebrations, holidays and commemoration days. A communication based on common memory therefore has to be established and transmitted through the media and ultimately through the literary text, which is itself a creation involving multiple voices. We may find a certain access to Marcela's promenades through Paris by relating them to the trials and tribulations of the Russian writer Andrei Gortschakow in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia* (1983). In the film, images of a mellow Italian panorama interfere with visual reminiscences of snow-white landscapes. This image is topographically distant but virtually present in the mind of a traveller who has had to flee his country and remains stricken with nostalgia for home. While Marcela is wandering through Paris like a *flâneuse*, "mapping scenes and memories of Cuba onto her Parisian streets and signs, making the landscape of her exile comprehensible, and making her Cuba accessible",<sup>22</sup> she keeps thinking of her childhood in Havana: of the streets with crumbling houses and lost illusions. These ruins not only stand for a past with unsatisfied promises; they also imply a blank to be filled in with new hopes and projects. Among heaps of texts and scrambles of news, Marcela discovers a movie script revealing Samuel to be the son of the unfortunate man ignited by his spouse. Ultimately, this document summarises the mental state of a whole generation of artists, students, authors and intellectuals who stray around the globe with "a migrant mentality and a sense of hopelessness for themselves and their country's future."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Alvarez Borland, *A Reminiscent Memory*, p. 352.

<sup>22</sup> Scarano/Zamora, *Cuba*, p. 340.

<sup>23</sup> Álvarez Borland: *A Reminiscent Memory*, 2004, p. 353.

Since the common background of these displaced persons remains Cuba, there are numerous analeptic segments that relate to the island. The chronology of the narration connected with Paris as the theatre of Marcela's daily yearnings and reflections is often interrupted by these narrative shifts back to the events in Cuba prior to her Parisian life, to Marcela's origins and to the base of her traumata. It is common knowledge that memory tends to reinterpret former impressions in light of the actual conditions the subject is exposed to.<sup>24</sup> Memories are reconstructed according to the present situation in order to adapt to the subject's current self-image. According to Søren Kierkegaard, life cannot only be understood in a retrospective way, but must be lived by looking ahead, the eyes always kept on the business to be done.<sup>25</sup> In her situation – unable to establish any relationships with other people – Marcela is forced to do just this. Though she is the addressee of much good and bad news, she does not reply to her correspondents and keeps a firm distance to all people, especially those dearest to her. The letters Marcela tirelessly writes remain unsent and consequently become the text of the novel. Her inability to communicate with certain correspondents directly implies a growing potential for literary communication that approximates, in some respects, a message in a bottle. *Going back to the old tradition of literary self-awareness* the young Goethe advocates with reference to his work *Werther*, the act of writing is nothing less than the cathartic effort to come to terms with the self. In its transformation into a poem, a picture or a concept, our inner agitation keeps us grounded.<sup>26</sup> Starting with a lecture on Proust, Marcela goes on to compose her own texts, thereby reshaping a world in which she was formerly restricted to be the object of others instead of the master of her life.

Nevertheless, the autodiegetic narrator deals with a language that constantly attacks the mental restrictions imposed on her. The proliferation of sexual details and images only emphasises a lack of real affection and attachment, the impotence of giving and receiving love. In one passage, Marcela admits that she mistakes sex for affection, a confession that clearly points out the chaos of her emotional life. This disorder presents itself in the structure of the highly fragmented text, a cocktail of partly funny, partly tragic, partly eccentric miscellany, which, in view of some critics, lacks coherence. Like the central characters in Severo Sarduy's *Cucuyo* (1990) or Reinaldo Arena's novella *Viaje a La Habana* (1990) "the protagonist engages in a fruitless search for home, remembering and returning only to find it impossible to fuse

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Marc Tadié: *Im Gedächtnispalast*. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Denkens. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bryan Magee: *The Story of Philosophy*. London: Dorling Kindersley Publishers, 2010, p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Johann W. von Goethe: *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit*. In: *Goethes Werke*. Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, Erich Trunz (ed.). Hamburg: Christian Wegner, 1948-60, vol. 10, p. 588.

the fragments of her identity as an exile.”<sup>27</sup> Only Marcela’s recovery at the end of the novel can piece together the different components of the puzzle. Leaving Cuba for New York and Paris, Marcela first and foremost covers the topographical distance necessary to deal with her traumatic experiences. Her exile is therefore not entirely motivated by political reasons. As oblivion belongs to the effect of memory, Marcela has to keep a distance in space and time between her past and her present life. Her Cuban home, abandoned by her indifferent parents, turns out to be as ill-omened as the streets of Rome in Natalia Ginzburg’s *Famiglia* for the male hero Carmine Donati, who avoids certain parts of the city because a lost and tragic love has turned them into contaminated and devastated regions.<sup>28</sup> Far away from her desolated home, in a place that is not as poisoned, Marcela succeeds in retrieving her memory by rediscovering the sensations that had been neutralised by shocking events in La Habana.

Finally the exchange between Marcela’s individual memory and its collective counterpart – in the terms Maurice Halbwachs posits as most essential for the mnemonic structure of every social being – is no longer hampered by trauma. Communication between the self and others takes on the purpose of finding a mutual base, and Marcela is likely to reply to her friends, swapping impressions. Traumatic events tend to stabilise “an experience by encrypting it, by keeping it inaccessible to conscious inspection and reconstruction.”<sup>29</sup> In Marcela’s case, too, the trauma calls for a highly fragmented nature of events separated from original context in place or time. Establishing a relationship with Samuel, she manages to relate her trauma to other moments and other people important in her life.

In our second novel, the act of writing is also seen as an opportunity to overcome one’s own resentments and establish a new view onto the future. The category of memory is recognised as a chance to expose individual and collective traumata and to access racial prejudices that also belong to collective memories. The anonymous hero, known only by his sexist nickname *Fessologue*, since he is a connoisseur of young women’s behinds, spends his days and nights in an Afro-Cuban bar situated in Château Rouge. This Parisian district is home to a large African community whose nostalgia is less related to their native continent than we might suppose with Marcela and her Cuban compatriots. If Africa is perceived as the origin of the black diaspora, it is in no sense regarded as the exclusive source of its identity from the point of view of the story-teller. According to the protagonist, neither Africa nor the West is

<sup>27</sup> Scarano/Zamora, *Cuba*, p. 322.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Natalia Ginzburg: *Famiglia*. Torino: Einaudi, 1995, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, p. 247.

idealised in the migrant's mind. As such, the Manichean logic so characteristic of both Euro- and Afrocentrism and the identities related to each is avoided. This perspective corresponds to the history of Black people in France, which Mabanckou himself describes as conflicting and sinuous.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to what is often affirmed by an idea of linear development – a mode of thinking so characteristic for the occidental version of history and therefore dominant in the colonial vision of the world,<sup>31</sup> the century-old movement of African migrants from villages to European metropolises cannot be explained in categories of progress.<sup>32</sup> More than just a destination, France (and Paris in particular) is strongly anchored in the collective imaginary of black people originating from the former colonies. In their minds, the metropolis is nothing less than a splendid realm of dreams, a wish-machine like that defined by Gilles Deleuze.<sup>33</sup> Reaching the metropolis is tantamount to a pilgrimage to Mecca, as Mabanckou himself puts it, and this attitude is common for those who actually find their way to the City of Lights after undergoing tremendous sacrifices. Until now, many refugees and asylum seekers have not been fortunate enough to arrive at their destination safely.

Even those African migrants who become foreign fellow citizens or even French nationals, however, encounter an indisputable block that does not just arise because of their black skin. Rather than constituting a homogeneous group, black migrants are themselves part of a pluralistic society that tends towards greater fragmentation than is examined in our novel.<sup>34</sup> Even the motive for immigration constitutes a matter of conflict. This fact is not only treated by the narrator, but also by his deep black true love *Couleur d'Origine*, his rival *L'Hybride*, the black racist Monsieur Hippocrate, Paul of the Greater Congo and, finally, the Haitian author Louis-Philippe, his master in political consciousness and in writing novels. Although the dramatis personae includes both pleasant and unpleasant figures, there are neither good nor bad types in *Black Bazar*. Instead, there are people with multiple and sometimes unpredictable characters whose views are either supported or rejected by our narrator.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Alain Mabanckou: *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*. Paris: Fayard, 2012, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria: 'Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt'. In: Sebastian Conrad; Shalini Randeria (ed.): *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2002, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Kian-Harald Karimi: Afrikanische Passagen zwischen Gestern und Heute: Auf den Spuren urbanen Lebens von Mongo Betis 'La ville cruelle' bis Alain Mabanckous 'Black Bazar', zur Veröffentlichung. In: Ursula Hennigfeld (ed.): *Nicht nur Paris. Metropolitane und urbane Räume in der französischsprachigen Literatur der Gegenwart*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012, p. 125-152.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L'Anti-Édipe: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Bénédicte Ledent: L'Afrique dans le roman de la diaspora anglophone. In: *Critique* 711-712 (2006) p. 739-750.

In this context, we learn how discriminating linguistic codes construct sense and identity by dealing in racial categories, old and new. These categories are sustained and recreated in the metropolitan life of African people. Explicit resentments between black and white people may seem to be on the decline due to a political correctness that tells us racism is outdated, anachronistic and old-fashioned. But this white mythology has in fact maintained its racial arrogance by adapting itself to new forms of social behaviour, as can be seen in the history of multi-ethnic Brazil.<sup>35</sup> Classic racism may indeed fade away, but at the price of antagonisms between black and white disintegrating into a sophisticated hierarchy of many different nuances, without giving up their inherited character of exclusion. Instead of becoming indignant about racist arguments, the narrator struggles to confront us with the image of wild, primitive, black savages; images so connected with our cultural memory that they can still imply violence or even mortal hatred between the races. In Michel Houellebecq's novel *L'extension de domaine de la lutte*, for example, a sexually motivated rivalry between young men nearly provokes the death of an African, who is called a dangerous animal.<sup>36</sup> Because such archetypes are still at work in our minds, the so-called process of civilisation described by Norbert Elias as a progressive cultivation of mankind seems to have reached its limits. In representing himself as the travesty of a *sapeur* and a perfumed sexual object attractive for white women, the narrator takes into account that a real destruction of old preconceptions has not occurred. While he boasts about the splendour of his genitals, a friend from the Ivory Coast is convinced that African men can infiltrate the former colonial power through biological means, conceiving children with white women.

African men are not those champions of international solidarity, as traditional third world discourses may assume. Instead, they themselves show racial prejudice. To satisfy their sexual appetites, they prefer fresh "gazelles" over self-confident black women, who are considered to be quarrelsome sex maniacs. In order to advance they choose light-skinned partners. This racially motivated behaviour recalls the collective trauma of black people resulting from slavery and the physical and moral devastations of colonialism. It also explains the position adopted by the narrator. Reducing and increasing with the colour of the skin, cultural rank is geared towards a white mythology identified as the only possible form of civilisation. We can

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<sup>35</sup> Petrônio Domingues: *Historia não contada, uma: Negro, racismo e branqueamento em São Paulo*. São Paulo: Senac, 2003, p. 265-266.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Michel Houellebecq: *L'extension de domaine de la lutte*. Paris: M. Nadeau, 1994, p. 82.

conclude, then, that the ideals of whiteness have not lost their universal claim.<sup>37</sup> As Europeans, we can also learn from the Brazilian experience that diversifying the base colours into thousands of shades does not necessarily result in a multi-cultural utopia. In fact, a diffuse racism is on the rise, producing even more sophisticated and invisible effects of whiteness. Related to this confusing situation, Mabanckou's bazaar resembles a negotiating table where different discourses are reviewed by the interviewer: the alleged inferiority of the black race, the anti-colonial resistance, the self-affirmation of black people, the codified anti-imperialism of Third World speeches. All of these text modules are like spices that are shown to a curious public who must taste them in order to select its preference.

Although the aroma of spices has little in common with discursive categories, in light of our interests and reflections, the metaphor of the bazaar avoids the stasis of a particular standpoint, which is so often defined by the irreversibility of ideological dogmas or traditions. On the other hand, it also prevents us from adopting the consumer's attitude of rummaging around distractedly in the shelves, since the reader has to deal with a bazaar as a sum of non-orientalist, but Africanist clichés.<sup>38</sup> The narrator "opens the doors to a 'black bazaar', a multiplicity of African and Caribbean voices that challenges the stereotypical image of the City of Lights as a beacon of Franco-French history and culture."<sup>39</sup> Similar to Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, *Black Bazar* helps us to exorcise an omnipresent phraseology deriving from a language that has always been a source of old and new predefinitions, prejudices, animosity and resentments. The act of writing, therefore, is more than pure amusement for our narrator. As his Franco-Ivorian friend, a mulatto, suggests, black African people are not as well equipped to compose novels or texts in other literary genres, because they look towards oral traditions which are more prevalent in languages that do not have fixed codes. The lightness of the skin seems to stand for the acuteness of thought, for the clarity and lucidity of expression which is undeniably typical for the trend-setting bon usage French. Nevertheless, the autodiegetic narrator transforms his life within "a self-sufficient ethnic enclave" into the material of his first novel, thus demonstrating his artistic self-awareness.<sup>40</sup> By experiencing the *mise en abyme* first introduced in the modern novel by André Gide, the Fessologue re-

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Wulf D. Hund: 'Die weiße Norm: Grundlagen des Farbassismus'. In: Max S. Hering Torres (ed.): *Cuerpos Anómalos*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia 2008, p. 171-203.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Koffi Anyinefa: Le métro parisien: Figures de l'exotisme postcolonial. In: *French Forum* 28/2 (2003), p. 77-98.

<sup>39</sup> Pascale de Souza: Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*. In: *Research in African Literatures*, 42/1 (2001), p. 102-119, p. 104.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Christina Horváth: 'The Cosmopolitan City'. In: Maria Rovisco; Magdalena Nowicka (eds.): *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, p. 87-106, p. 100.

veals his talent as a writer who consequently becomes the author of his own life. Since he cannot look back on literary traditions or on a canon like Marcela, however, the luminous hand symbolising the power of fiction in Valdés' novel cannot be anything but concrete and contemporary in this context. After a period of apprenticeship with Louis-Philippe, the earthly Belgian painter, Sarah, becomes his muse and new love. So this novel is also a workshop for the composition of novels, as the title *Black Bazar* suggests. As Elias Canetti writes, a bazaar differs from a department store in that customers are able to watch how goods are manufactured without succumbing to the charms of anonymous production.<sup>41</sup>

Similar to Marcela's experience, composing a literary text launches a virtually cathartic effect in the Fessologue. Since he is full of animosity towards his rival, he does not feel free to address himself to a reader who would be interested in his message. Racism, more than an ugly and spiteful ideology to be fought by enlightened minds, is the product of conflicting interests, envy and the rat race so deeply connected with the historical memory of Black people. The reader is well aware that these resentments play an enormous role in the narrator's point of view, characterised by the racist depreciation of the other. Ridding himself of this excess of scorn and hatred, he manages to create his first novel by recomposing what has been ruined since his companion abandoned him. Writing and living, discourse and practice, offer him an orientation, producing a new sense and significance. In this case, *Black Bazar* not only constitutes a space of conflicting discourses; it is also the self-staging of an artist becoming involved in a workshop of writing, considered as a process, which enables him to acquire full creative skills. He overcomes the anachronistic restrictions imposed on black people, proving that they comply with the intellectual and linguistic requirements of the composition of fictional texts. As we know, literary traditions in Africa have mostly been constructed on oral codes that "include praise, poetry, stories, proverbs, and riddles",<sup>42</sup> which were used by village communities to express themselves according to religious and ancestral customs. The lucidity of our narrator's expression evidently does not depend on the lightness of his skin, however, as he fully knows how to adapt his narrative discourse to the requirements of the new urban setting. The so far unconcealed author constructs what Martin Heidegger calls 'the house of language',<sup>43</sup> expressly beneficial for unprotected and homeless people relying on

<sup>41</sup> Elias Canetti: *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch. Aufzeichnungen nach einer Reise*; Das Gewissen der Worte. München/Wien: C. Hanser, 1995, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> John Middleton (ed.): *Africa: An encyclopedia for students*. New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001, p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Heidegger: *Über den Humanismus*. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1949, p. 271.



discourses of self-understanding. Written codes have the potential of putting all conventions, rituals and habits running our daily life into question.

In his use of language as well as the object of his reflections, the narrator has completely arrived in his new domain. Representing a wide spectrum of all parts of (Francophone) Africa ranging from the shores of Senegal to those of the Great Lakes, migrants in the Parisian metropolitan landscape effectively do not share an African language. They all command French as a common idiom, which is initially restricted to a written code. For the Fessologue, then, the use of the colonial language to imply greater or lesser degrees of integration within the literary discourse system of the metropolis comes without question. In this regard, he is in good company with Mabanckou himself, who pleads that African authors should adopt a more cosmopolitan view. According to this approach, the artistic engagement of African authors should not be bound to the endeavours of African specialists who are sustained by the spirit of authenticity and idealisation. The centre of their attention must focus on literary occupation instead of the creation of idyllic images of the native soil.<sup>44</sup> Africa herself is not limited to those well-known contours on the world map. Day by day she is invented by African people all over the world, even in the old heart of the ancient empire where the continent is conceived as an idea to be created and developed; as a source of poetic inspiration for those who take the initiative to write a novel.

## V. Conclusion

Memories are essential for our existence. Through them we constitute an identity that gives our life the coherence and continuity necessary to overcome crisis and trauma. In Marcela's case, the Proustian inter-text lends memories a nostalgic accent, implying, that is to say, a past that was not ideal, yet remains a means of sharing common interests and hopes. A trauma, a disruption of life that is originally taken for granted, can be healed through a community of people who share a common ground, a common environment, a common cultural basis. *Café Nostalgia* explicitly shows how a community can cope with an uncertain future by looking back. Under these conditions, traumata are not only psychological maladies, but also opportunities to review one's life conception, to challenge those norms and settings which have implicitly played a part in its construction. Within the ambiguity of memory, according to Aleida Assmann, stereotypes are necessarily required to form the foundation of our orienta-

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<sup>44</sup> Mabanckou, *Le sanglot*, p. 158.

tion and self-definition.<sup>45</sup> Like Marcela in her Parisian diaspora, we cannot begin with a *tabula rasa*. Stereotypes, the basis of prejudices, call us to prefer this or that cultural norm; not because it is necessarily better than others, but because we command it better than that of our neighbour. Preconceptions are likewise connected with the character of language, which, as Hegel in the tradition of early romantic language criticism points out, always tends to generalise the complex as a result of the law of the least effort.<sup>46</sup> Literature evidently presents the best way of challenging the universal character of language. By means of language, it puts what would otherwise remain an object of abstraction, and therefore of prejudice, into a biographical context. In this sense, *Black Bazar* shows us that prejudices, defying the control of verification, can distort our judgments. They are, then, self-imposed thought-controls occupied by unquestioned feelings, values and interests. By exposing the racist character of his preconceptions, the Fessologue, traumatised by the loss of his love, plays with our own resentments. As an African in Paris, however, he also demonstrates that no race is free from the base human instincts that come as a result of conflicting interests, jealousy and distrust as opposed to from an evil ideology. While Cuba remains the site of immediate transcendence for the collective mind in the Caribbean novel (the Santería culture, the devotion for the *Virgen de la Regla*), in *Black Bazar*, the blackness of African bodies rather than Africa herself is linked to a common legacy and memory. The colour of the skin is simultaneously an object of pride, self-denial and prejudice. Although the exiled and displaced Cubans to which Marcela refers each suffer an individual fate, they are all obsessed with memories of Cuba; a *nostalgie du paradis perdu*.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the African migrants embodied by the Fessologue do not cling as much to memories of their native countries, which, afflicted by cruel dictatorships, are far from idyllic. Compared to the Cubans, their fate as black people transcends a topographical notion of origin, which, due to the history of slavery and colonialism, is no longer merely restricted to Africa.

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<sup>45</sup> Aleida Assmann: 'Introduction'. In: Anton Pelinka, Karin Bischof et al. (eds.): *Handbook of Prejudice*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009, p. 1-33.

<sup>46</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Text and Commentary: Hegel's Preface to his System in a new Translation with Commentary on Facing Pages, and 'Who thinks abstractly?'* Notre Dame (Indiana): University of Notre Dame Press, 1977, p. 113.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Renée Clémentine Lucien: *Résistance et Cubanité*. Trois écrivains nés avec la Révolution cubaine. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006, p. 209.